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June 8, 2005

Mr. Mark Everson
Commissioner
Internal Revenue Service
1111 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20224

Dear Commissioner Everson:

Like many others in Maine, I was extremely surprised and disappointed to see that the IRS plans to close the IRS Taxpayer Assistance Centers (TACs) in South Portland and Augusta, Maine, leaving only three of the present five Centers in Maine operating.

The closures would isolate southern Maine and its over 800,000 residents from reasonable access to the vital face-to-face assistance rendered by the IRS in these TACs. The plan also calls for the closure of the Portsmouth, New Hampshire office, leaving a distance of nearly 150 miles between the remaining TACs of Lewiston, Maine and Manchester, New Hampshire. This isolation is a very real hardship on my constituents for the following reasons:

- It discriminates against lower income people without cars in a state where public transportation outside of the metropolitan areas is sporadic and, in most cases, non-existent;
- It displays bias against many senior citizens who are not conversant with use of the internet;
- Many seniors and others who traditionally avail themselves of help from TACs are extremely uncomfortable, if not incapable, of dealing with the system of prompts and automated voice services that are the backbone of the toll-free number system.
- The Portland metropolitan area is home to a large number of new immigrants, whose numbers are constantly growing. This population, often struggling with language and communication issues, relies greatly on the face-to-face assistance of programs like the TACs. As new taxpayers, they are especially vulnerable to these types of cut-backs.
- Complex cases that compel people to seek out help from a TAC are generally inadequately served by a "call center" method of operation in which a taxpayer who needs to make several calls will deal with different personnel each time. This is a woefully inefficient way of providing the assistance for those non-routine matters that the TACs were formed to deliver in the first place.
- To the extent that some populations and some cases can be appropriately served by the internet and toll-free calling system, IRS is further stressing those systems with

concurrent cutbacks, which reduces its ability to handle increased traffic caused by the closure of the TACs.

- While the reduction in force of these proposed closures is 18 percent of Taxpayer Assistance staff nationally, in Maine it is 61 percent of TAC staff, and 100 percent in the 1st Congressional District. Why should Maine absorb such a disproportionate hit from the rest of the country, especially given our rural character and elderly population?

Taxpayer Assistance helps the individual taxpayer and delivers more revenue to the Treasury. Without this assistance taxpayers are at best confused; at worst, they may give up on the process of seeking help with complex issues and become delinquent. Firing the TAC specialists may also drive taxpayers to seek help from other IRS personnel working in the Revenue division and distract them from doing their principal jobs, which in the long run will cost the IRS revenue. VITA sites can assist some taxpayers, but as they are only open for the two months of the year before April 15th, they can only alleviate a small portion of the problem. The decision to close these Centers cannot be defended as providing alternative and equal customer service to Maine residents or as being more efficient in total revenue collection: it fails equally on both of these counts.

I understand that the Secretary of the Treasury intends to reduce total Treasury staff by 25 percent. These closures seem to advance that single goal at the expense of both taxpayers and revenue collections. Not long ago, IRS decided to reduce foot traffic to the Centers by moving taxpayers to the web site or the 800 system. The success of that effort has now been turned into a justification for closing these facilities, a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure.

Mr. Commissioner, I ask you to review the fallacy of closing the TACs in South Portland and Augusta, which would prevent three-quarters of a million people from being able to obtain meaningful assistance in solving their tax problems and will reduce revenue to the Service and to the Treasury.

I am asking you to provide me all of the pertinent documentation that was relied upon in making these decisions. Of particular importance is information regarding the count of walk-in traffic at these two centers, the number of returns prepared, and the number of EITC contacts. I am also interested in knowing the percentage of the total state wide traffic that the South Portland facility served. I believe that Taxpayer Assistance service in this area of Maine needs to be maintained and I look forward to personally discussing this issue with you.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I would appreciate a response by June 21st.

Sincerely,



Tom Allen
Member of Congress

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